

Promoting Sustainable Development Goals Using Selected Literary Texts

Basu, Prita

Research Scholar, Department of English, NIILM University, Kaithal

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Abstract

Explores the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into language and literature teaching, emphasizing the use of selected literary texts to foster global awareness and linguistic competence among learners. Drawing upon John Donne's notion of interconnectedness, the paper argues that literature, as a mirror of society and a powerful pedagogical tool, can effectively promote the values of sustainability, equality, and responsibility. The study specifically analyzes three poems—"On Killing a Tree" by Gieve Patel, "A Work of Artifice" by Marge Piercy, and "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou—to highlight how each reflects key SDGs such as environmental conservation, gender equality, freedom, and social justice. Through a methodological approach incorporating role play, debates, and collaborative poetry, the paper demonstrates how language teachers can create meaningful learning experiences that go beyond linguistic skills to instill ethical consciousness and global citizenship. Ultimately, the study advocates for a literature-based classroom that not only develops communicative competence but also inspires learners to become responsible individuals contributing to sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), literature, language teaching, global awareness, communicative competence, pedagogy, environmental consciousness, gender equality.

Introduction

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;”, this immortal line by John Donne in his famous prose work “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions”, Meditation XVII reiterates the fact that man does not exist all by himself. It emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness and social nature of human existence. Taking the analogy a step further, it can be added that the existence of man is directly linked to the existence of other life forms as human beings are integral part of the ecosystem. Therefore, it is the responsibility of human beings to use the natural resources and meet the development needs of the present generation in such a manner that it does not compromise the needs of the future generations [1]. This is what the concept of ‘Sustainable Development’ is.

Since educators aim to make the learning content in classroom relevant to the lives of the learners for effective learning to take place, bringing global issues like ‘Sustainable Development’ in the classroom can do wonders by raising global awareness among the learners and transforming them into sensitive social individuals and citizens [2]. In this regard, teachers of language can motivate learners a lot to develop social responsibility by selecting authentic literary texts that incorporate the different Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs) and using them in classroom teaching [3]. It should not be forgotten that literature is “an ally of language ”[4].It represents the recurrent uses of language. So, literature can be used as an effective teaching tool to promote SDGs. As English is a global language, using different literary texts in English can prove to be fruitful in achieving the purpose. The paper presented here thus aims to emphasize and justify the effectiveness of using selected literary texts in classroom teaching to promote the goals of Sustainable Development to create a global awareness among learners and to bring among them linguistic and communicative competence additionally. The literary texts employed here to meet these goals are “On Killing A Tree” by Gieve Patel, “A Work Of Artifice” by Marge Piercy and “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou.

What is Development?

Ogunnaike M.J. et. al.,[5] are of the opinion that development is a process of positive change that involves two basic elements, that is, planning and action. According to them, if a

programme is planned thoughtfully and if it is ensured that the plan is implemented properly to bring about the desired result, then it has a positive impact on people.

Ogunnaike M.J. et. al., [5] believe that development is a multi-faceted concept which suggests qualitative improvement in the living conditions of people on one hand and a process of economic and social transformation within countries, on the other hand.

Bamidele [6] asserts that development is connected with the individual, which subsequently determines the development of the nation involved.

As perceived by Paulley [7], development is a process that tends to alter an existing social structure, popular attitudes and national institutions with a view to accelerating economic growth, decreasing inequalities of all kinds within societies as well as reducing absolute poverty among the population.

From the above opinions, it can be inferred that development involves utilization of resources to improve the well-being of the people to provide them with the basic amenities, decent housing, transportation and communication services, equal opportunities for employment and a society devoid of poverty. No nation can claim to have achieved the status of a developed nation if it fails to meet these basic needs of its citizens. As each drop of water contributes to the making of an ocean, the development of each individual adds to the growth and development of a nation.

What is Sustainable Development?

Kahle, L.R. and E. Gurel-Atay, [8] view ‘sustainability’ as a process of living within the limits of available resources in such a way that it allows all living beings to live in perpetuity.

It was at the United Nations Conference on Human Development at Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, that the concept of ‘Sustainable Development’ was mentioned. There the U.N discussed about the rights of families to have proper health, productive environment, uninterrupted energy supply, affordable education and democratic governance.

The term ‘Sustainable Development’ was referred by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1983) to meet the development needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations. The UN opined that all the countries of the world should be able to provide their citizens with the needs within the ambit of their economic resources. The UN’s adoption of an 8–point development agenda

called the “Millennium Development Goals’ (MDGs) in the year 2000 was very significant in this regard.

The MDG stalk of: (i) Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger(ii) Achieving universal primary education (iii) Promoting gender equality and empowerment of women (iv) Reducing child mortality (v) Improving maternal health (vi) Combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases (vii) Ensuring environmental sustainability (viii) Developing a global partnership for development.

As many countries could not meet up with the 2015 deadline for achieving the MDGS, the United Nations had to meet in September 2015 to adopt the year 2030 agenda known as “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs). The SDGs aim to guide the different countries of the world and to measure the achievement of those goals by the year 2030.

The 17 SDGs are briefly stated as follows: (i) No poverty (ii) Zero hunger (iii) Good health and well-being (iv) Quality education (v) Gender equality (vi) Clean water and sanitation (vii) Affordable and clean energy (viii) Decent work and economic growth (ix) Industry, innovation and infrastructure (x) Reduced inequalities (xi) Sustainable cities and communities (xii) Responsible consumption and production (xiii) Climate action (xiv) Life below water (xv) Life on land (xvi) Peace, justice and strong institutions (xvii) Partnerships for the goals [\[15\]](#)

It must be remembered that meeting these SDGs are necessary for a nation in order to be known as a developed nation. ‘Quality education’ for all, which is as an important SDG, is absolutely indispensable to the progress and development of a nation. Herein comes the role of teachers who can enlighten the learners with a deeper understanding of these goals and direct all actions to realize these goals. In this regard, a wise selection of literary texts by language teachers to be used in classroom, can contribute immensely in promoting the SDGs among learners.

Relevance of Using Literature in Promoting SDGS

Literature acts as a mirror of the society. It reflects the thoughts, ideologies and culture of various people. Collie and Slater argue that “Though the world of literature is a created one, it depicts contextually vivid characters from varied social backgrounds. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believes in, fear, enjoy; how

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they speak and behave behind closed doors. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society.”[9]. This also bridges the cultural gap as well as encourages mutual respect and understanding in the larger society. Having such positive understanding of each other and respecting other’s needs without being self-centred help human beings to act responsibly and use the available resources without jeopardizing the needs of the future generations. This is indeed the realization of some of the important goals of Sustainable Development, if not all.

Besides these, literary texts serve as authentic samples of language with a wide range of stylistic features in different social contexts [10]. They encourage critical thinking among learners and also boost up their communicative competence. Lazar, G.[11] Says, “Literature is a particularly good source for developing students’ abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations. This is because literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/learner is actively involved in ‘teasing out’ the unstated implications and assumptions of the text.”

So, language teachers can do a wide selection of literary texts that incorporate the SDGs to sensitize the learners to issues like the need for quality education for all, gender equality, equal employment opportunities, preventing exploitation of resources, protecting the environment and the like.

Using Selected Literary Texts To Promote SDGs:

A Methodological Approach

McKay, S.[12] rightly points out “success in using literature greatly depends upon a selection of text which will not be overly difficult on either a linguistic or conceptual level”. Since the aim here is to promote the SDGs and bring a global awareness among the learners, the teacher must judiciously select literary texts that deal with issues related to those goals. The following literary texts have been selected for this purpose:

- (i) “On Killing A Tree” by Gieve Patel
- (ii) “A Work of Artifice” by Marge Piercy
- (iii) “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

All these selected texts are examples of poetry. As a literary genre, poetry is preferable to teach language due to its short length, multiple stylistic, linguistic features and suitability for

a single classroom teaching [10]. Also, these texts embody different SDGs which is why they have been chosen to make the learners aware of the global issues as well as to bring a language awareness among them. After all, language has a symbiotic relationship with literature.

(i) “On Killing A Tree” by Gieve Patel

Since saving the Earth is a core and crucial component of the Sustainable Development Goals and "protecting the planet" is a central theme, the importance of trees can't be ignored in preserving the environment. The growth of life on earth is not possible to prosper without maintaining ecological balance. Trees are our true friends and genuine benefactors. Each and every living creature on earth is a part of the eco system and the food chain. However, man is not contented. He intends to master Nature and overpower her. He exploits her more than she can bear.

As a reaction and to give caution, many Indian English poets and writers have started depicting the concern for ecology with an alarming threat of disaster. Many ecocritics draw attention to this aspect of environmentalism where the concern for ecology is mentioned in literature, known as Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature and ecology or environment. The term “ecocriticism” was first used by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”[13]

Gieve Patel, a playwright and a medical practitioner is associated with the “Green Movement” which is a group of writers with their intention to protect the environment. “On Killing A Tree” is Patel’s attempt to make human beings aware that the thoughtless felling of trees can only take man a step closer to his own destruction. It is a plea for the readers to protect the environment.

The teacher can divide this long poem into three sections and scaffold the learners to help them arrive at the meaning on their own; first into fragments and finally into a harmonious whole. The three sections could be as follows:

Section 1: “It takes much time to kill a tree /... / Sprouting leaves.”

Section 2: “So hack and chop / ... / To former size.”

Section 3: “No, / ... / and then it is done.”

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(“On Killing A Tree” Poem by Gieve Patel - Poem Hunter)

Attention of the learners should be drawn to the title of the poem with special focus on the use of the word “killing”. It is “killing” of a tree just like murdering of a human being and not merely cutting. Various lexical items, rhetorical devices used, stylistic features of the text should be explored in the classroom for language teaching and learning. For the learning of the language to take place effectively, the learners must be engaged in reading the poem because when they read, the learners are communicating, deciphering meanings and reflecting on different strategies in the target language which is a “crucial factor in the development of language learning abilities”[\[4\]](#).

For making the learners aware of one of the important goals of Sustainable Development which is related to the preservation of the environment without exploiting its resources, the whole poem should be thoughtfully explored. As the learners arrive at the complete meaning of the text, it would foster in them an eco-consciousness. They are made conscious of the importance of Nature and man’s duty to protect it. They would realise that the excitement and “joy of the butcher in Patel’s poem is transient. Though man appears as an achiever, he is the loser in the planet.”[\[14\]](#). Different activities should be judiciously designed by the teacher by using this literary text to bring a global awareness about the SDGs related here and also to bring linguistic and communicative competence among the learners.

(ii) “A Work of Artifice” by Marge Piercy

Marge Piercy, an American progressive activist and writer talks about the loss of growth and freedom of women through the metaphor of a ‘bonsai tree’ in her poem “A Work of Artifice”. This literary text can serve as a wonderful example to teach the learners about some very important SDGs, that is, the significance of gender equality, reducing inequalities of all kinds and the like.

It is a short verse, so the teacher can guide the learners to explore the theme of the poem as a whole. The teacher should guide the learners to understand how a Japanese art form ‘bonsai’ that is, the cultivation of small trees, in containers, to mimic the shape and style of mature, full size trees, can metaphorically mean how a woman is subjected to gender inequality by oppression.

The lines “The bonsai tree/ in the attractive pot/could have grown eighty feet tall/on the side of a mountain/till split by lightning./But a gardener/ carefully pruned it. / It is nine inches

high.” (“A Work O Artifice” Poem by Marge Piercy – Poem Hunter) draw our attention to the fact which is implied in the verse that a life severely restrained, without freedom to grow, without equal opportunities can be choking. It curbs the fundamental rights of the subject or the person to live a free life with equal opportunities and a life of dignity. Through this verse, the poet questions if women are just materials of interior decoration and only expected to remain confined to do the household tasks. The poet also raises the question if women are expected to understand their limits and remain tightly tied to their responsibilities or their roots, “It is your nature / to be small and cozy, / domestic and weak; / how lucky, little tree, / to have a pot to grow in.” The dignity of women is severely compromised when the act “to dwarf their growth” is shown as a glorious achievement on the part of the gardener or those who wish to curb the free spirit and growth of women. It brings into limelight how discriminations based on gender thrive in our society. If such discriminations are not eliminated soon, then the SDGs can’t be achieved completely because a nation where such inequalities remain, equal opportunities of employment can’t be found and as its consequence, no poverty and zero hunger which are other significant SDGs can’t be achieved too. The teacher should design activities using this literary text to create a consciousness among the learners about the SDGs as they are interlinked.

(iii) “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

In the poem “Caged Bird”, Maya Angelou, an American memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist, presents the yearning of a caged bird for the free sky. While the free bird enjoys liberty and joy, the caged bird struggles with confinement and a desire for freedom presented through the act of singing, “The free bird leaps/ on the back of the wind / and floats downstream / till the current ends / and dips his wings / in the orange sun rays / and dares to claim the sky. / But a bird that stalks / down his narrow cage / can seldom see through / his bars of rage / his wings are clipped and / his feet are tied / so he opens his throat to sing.” (“Caged Bird” Poem by Maya Angelou– Poem Hunter).

Though the poet here talks particularly in the context of the African American experience in the United States, the issues she raises are not restricted to any specific geographical territory. The metaphor of the free bird and the caged bird represent not just the oppression of the black or racial injustice existing in the lives of the African Americans. The issues become universal in nature in the sense that they speak about lack of freedom, lack of equal

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opportunities among people and discriminations which exist in the lives of people that eventually compel them to live a life without dignity and prevent nations from progressing. All these issues are definitely global and related to SDGs. So, this literary text can prove to be immensely helpful in making the learners aware of those goals and also teach them to be respectful towards others' needs. Carefully planned and designed activities on the part of the teacher for the learners can indeed make this text worthful to promote the SDGs among them.

Sample Classroom Activities on the Selected Texts

The following activities may be implemented in the classroom using the above mentioned texts to help the learners understand the importance of the different SDGs and also to achieve linguistic and communicative competence additionally. These activities are addressed to intermediate learners as they have linguistic schemata.

Activity 1: Role playing

Aim: To promote awareness and understanding of Sustainable Development Goals and develop communicative competence through role playing using "On Killing a Tree" by Gieve Patel.

1. Divide the class into small groups and name each group.
2. Ask each member of the groups to choose his or her role as a tree, a woodcutter, a wild animal, a bird, a marine creature, a human being and the earth.
3. Instruct them to enact their selected role by effectively communicating with others on any one of the following themes of 'Preserving the Planet', 'Afforestation', 'The Dangers Of Deforestation', 'Green Earth' or 'Saving The Planet'.
4. Each group must explain how its performance is promoting the SDGs.
5. After each presentation, small rewards can be given to the groups to encourage them.

Activity 2: Debate

Aim: To foster critical thinking and persuasive language skills while discussing Sustainable Solutions using "A Work of Artifice" by Marge Piercy.

1. Divide the class into two groups and give them the motion 'The world is best led by both men and women and not by one.'

2. Explain to the groups that they will be participating in a debate where they need to discuss and defend their views for or against the given motion.
3. Ask them to talk about relevant SDGs like the importance of Gender Equality and the like.
4. The best team is rewarded that can think critically and demonstrate effective linguistic and communicative competence.

Activity 3: Collaborative Poetry

Aim: To create collaborative poems that highlight global issues related to SDGs, promote teamwork and creativity using “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou.

1. Divide the class into small groups of five.
2. Introduce the global issues like ‘Gender Equality’, ‘Racial Equality’, ‘Freedom For All’, ‘Equal Employment Opportunities’, ‘No Poverty’, ‘Zero Hunger’ and the like.
3. Assign each group a global issue to research and instruct them to explore its objectives, challenges and potential impact.
4. Ask the learners to collaboratively write poems related to the global issues.
5. Discuss various poetry forms (e.g., acrostic, haiku, free verse, rhyming) that they can use to accomplish this activity.
6. Ask each group to compose the poems as a team work.
7. Ask respective groups to present its collaborative poem to the class by reciting and name the SDG that it is talking about.
8. Compile all the collaborative poems into a class poetry anthology that reflects the learners’ perspectives on the SDGs.

Conclusion

This paper has examined a possible application of literature using the selected literary texts “On Killing A Tree” by Gieve Patel, “A Work Of Artifice” by Marge Piercy and “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou to promote Sustainable Development Goals among the learners. The sample activities proposed here will not only help the learners to develop global consciousness related to the SDGs but also bring linguistic and communicative among them.

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The global awareness will transform the learners into better human beings who will act in life with a greater sense of responsibility and duty towards the planet.

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